International Journal of Pedagogies and Learning, 3(3), pp. 14-22. December 2007

Students with Low Entry Scores Succeed At University

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This article has been anonymously peer-reviewed and accepted for publication in the *International Journal of Pedagogies and Learning*, an international, peer-reviewed journal that focuses on issues and trends in pedagogies and learning in national and international contexts. ISSN 1833-4105.

Abstract

University of Southern Queensland low entry score, first year Business students were more likely to pass MGT1000: Organisational Behaviour and Management than any other Bachelor of Business core course during the period 2003-2005. In this paper two of the academics teaching this course identify the two key teaching strategies that they contend contributed most to these results.

The first of these strategies (scaffolding) was used to teach students strategies that they can use – for example, to analyse a case study or construct an argument within an essay. The teaching team speculate that scaffolding facilitated the students' transition into the university as an academic *milieu* and thus enhanced their prospects for academic success in the course. The second teaching strategy presented in the paper involved the creation of the academic as a supportive social presence within the course (even for students studying at a distance) through the adoption of a particular, conversational kind of 'voice' in text based materials. The team assert that this facilitated students' transition into the university as a social *milieu* and facilitated their subsequent retention and success within the course.

Papers of this type have an increasing significance as the acceptance of students with low entry scores into university seems likely to continue. Universities need to create learning contexts which accommodate these students, without diluting academic standards. The paper is intended more as food for thought for other practitioners than as a simple recipe for teaching success.

Introduction

The Australian university of the 21st century bears little resemblance to the Australian university at the time of the foundation of Australia's first universities. At least two major paradigm shifts have occurred in conceptions of universities in that intervening period; universities have gone from being perceived as a form of investment in society's future to being perceived as a source of recurring cost for society (the investment–cost shift) and from operating within an elite education model to operating within a mass education model (the elite–mass education shift) (Lawrence, 2003, p. 2). Each of these two paradigm shifts has had a very direct impact on current university operation.

Consistent with this investment–cost paradigm shift, Australian universities are now funded by the Federal Government on the basis of Effective Full Time Student Units (EFTSU). This funding arrangement means that all Australian universities –

especially cash-strapped regional universities like the University of Southern Queensland (USQ) – need to make sure that they fill all their student quotas at the start of each year.

In line with other Queensland tertiary education institutions, USQ uses students' Overall Position (OP) scores in selecting students for entry. According to the Queensland Studies Authority (2004):

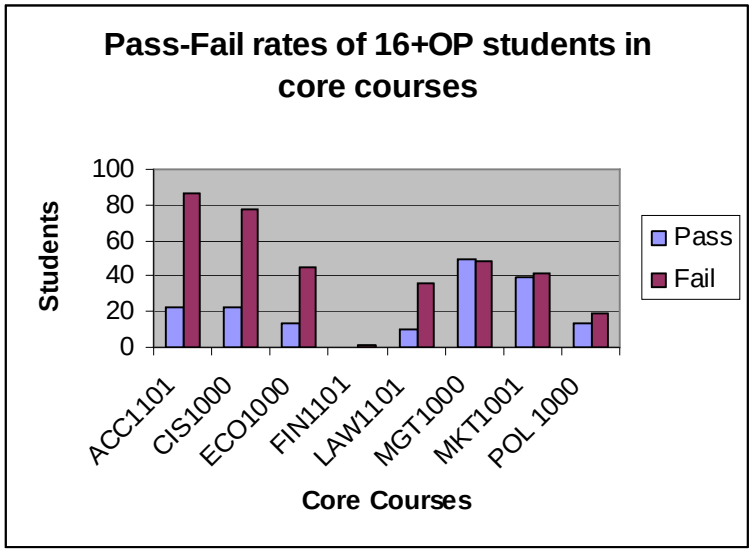
> Overall Positions, or OPs, provide a statewide rank order of students (on a 1 to 25 scale, 1 being the highest) based on students' achievement in Authority subjects studied for the Queensland Senior Certificate. A student's OP shows how well that student has performed in their senior studies when compared with the performances of all other OP-eligible students in Queensland.

Consistent with the elite–mass education paradigm shift within universities, the Faculty of Business at USQ is accepting some students with relatively low OPs – of 16 or greater – to ensure that all quotas are filled. In other words, USQ is accepting students who did not perform particularly strongly in their Queensland Senior Certificate studies. The problem with this is that entry score into university is generally considered a good predictor of students' likelihood of success at university (Evans & Farley, 1998; Johnes, 1990). This means potentially that USQ may be accepting students with low prospects for success into its programs. This is potentially a problem for the students involved as individuals, as well as a problem for the institution. Within the current funding regime the retention and progression of students towards graduation (not just the number of students starting study each year) are of great importance for all Australian universities.

However, the prospects for low OP students are not uniformly bleak. The relationship between post-school and school performance varies between individuals and groups (Power, Robertson & Baker, 1987, as cited in McKenzie & Schweitzer, 2001, pp. 21-22) as there are many possible causes of student attrition beyond entry score (Johnes, 1990; Tinto, 1975, 1998). Further, "when students (with a low university entry score) are provided with an appropriately supportive transitional program and environment, retention rates and academic performance can be comparable with those of the mainstream student body" (Levy & Murray, 2005, p. 129).

Indeed, there has been a steady improvement in low OP student performance across core courses with the Faculty of Business at USQ from 2003 to 2005. Specifically, while no low OP students achieved a pass or higher in 2003, approximately 6% did so in 2004 and 19% did so in 2005. Of particular interest in this paper is the performance of low OP students within MGT1000 Organisational Behaviour and Management. This course is the only core course to have more low OP students who passed than failed in the period 2003-2005. Table 1 represents graphically the pass–fail rates of low OP students across Faculty of Business core courses in 2003-2005.

Table 1: Performance of low OP score students in Faculty of Business core courses, 2003-2005



While these findings are gratifying at face value, they also raised some questions for the three member team teaching MGT1000. Had these outcomes been achieved through the lowering of academic standards and the passing of students who were in reality under performing? Or was the team doing a masterful job of teaching by providing a learning environment that truly facilitated the learning and progression of these students? We hoped the latter, rather than the former, but began the task of excavating the reasons for student success.

We adopted a three pronged strategy to that end. Our first test for the course was through the process of peer review. We subjected our teaching materials and the course outcomes to a process of peer review through an application for an Excellence in Teaching award within our faculty, which we won. This was affirming but not sufficient to unpack what exactly we were doing successfully in the course. Our second strategy, which is still in progress, has been the development of an online survey of MGT1000 students that will provide a student voice in this review process. Our final strategy for testing the probity of the course was for the teaching team to engage in a process of reflection and speculation about the possible reasons for the success of students within the course. This paper reports the outcomes of this final strategy; our speculations.

MGT1000 Organisational Behaviour and Management – An Overview

MGT1000 is one of eight core courses that every USQ Bachelor of Business student must complete within her or his program. The course introduces students to the discipline of organisational behaviour and management from a management perspective and focuses on the ways in which managers can mobilise individuals, groups and systems within organisations to achieve more effective organisational outcomes.

Each year the course is offered across four semesters: Semester 1 (March to June), Semester 2 (July to early November), Semester 3 (late November till February) and Semester 6 (which runs across Semesters 2 and 3). The course is offered in an internal mode – where students attend face-to-face teaching sessions – across three USQ campuses and in an external mode – where students study using print and online materials – and through a number of international partnerships.

The recommended enrolment pattern suggests that students undertake MGT1000 in their first semester of study or in their first year of study at least and approximately 1,100 students complete the course each year. Consistent with the wider Australian trend towards highly diverse student groups (McKenzie & Schweitzer, 2001), the MGT1000 student body includes students with English as a second language, school leavers and mature age students as well as students from outside the Faculty of Business who enrol in the course as an elective.

The Two Major Areas That the Team Have Focused On

The teaching team tentatively attribute the success of low OP students within MGT1000 to the team's simultaneous focus on students' academic and social transition into the university *milieu*. The transition of students into university is characterised by a process of "integration" of the student into or the "intertwining" of the student with the university community and its demands (Krause, 2001, p. 148). The team's focus on academic outcomes for students is consistent with immediate institutional and students' aims that target student retention and progression. The focus on social integration has its origins in the evidence that social integration enhances the likelihood of academic success (Peel, 2000). The rationale for these foci is now discussed in more detail.

The team's focus on students' academic transition to university is informed by Lawrence's (2002) compelling case for a "deficit-discourse [paradigm] shift" in conceptions of first year students. Consistent with Lawrence's (2002) perspective on the first year experience, the MGT1000 teaching team believe that many first year students lack familiarity with university culture and its many discourses, rather than lacking the necessary skills and abilities for success at university. This is contrary to a prevailing "mindset that students who are not successful or have difficulties in their academic achievements are not intellectually able or are not 'prepared' for university" (Croxon & Maginnis, 2006, p. 132). Lawrence (2002) argues for a paradigm shift, away from a conception of students as being fundamentally "deficit" or inadequate to a conception of students as requiring orientation to the multiple "discourses" embedded in an otherwise unfamiliar university culture.

Within this framework it is incumbent on academics to "make their discourses explicit" (Lawrence, 2002, p. 7). To this end the MGT1000 teaching team has amongst other things developed a number of scaffolded activities that actively teach 'good easy writing' to students. One of these is reported in more detail within this paper as an exemplar of the thrust towards transparency in our teaching and assessment processes.

In addition, the team focused on facilitating students' social integration into the university community, as a mechanism for facilitating students' academic transition. Tinto (1998, p. 450) found that "…successful students consistently made use of the metaphor of having successfully made the passage to college life and of having been helped over a threshold by some member of the faculty or staff". Of particular interest in this paper therefore is the social presence (Gunawardena & Zittle, 1996) of the academic to students. This focus on social transition is illustrated within this paper through discussion of the manner in which the academic is constructed as a supportive social presence with course materials.

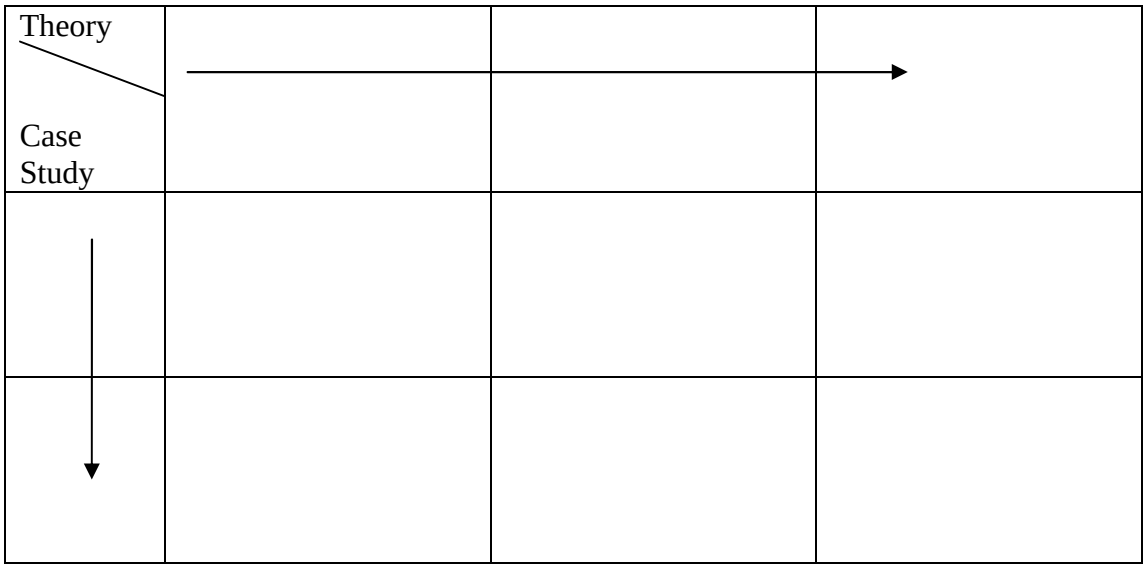
Scaffolding for Student Academic Transition

Scaffolding has been variously defined in the literature, but largely refers to a process of assisting students to achieve a goal that they otherwise could not achieve (Sharpe, 2006, p. 212). In Vygotsky's (1998) terms scaffolding involves the closing of the "zone of proximal development" – the gap between a student's current stage of development and her or his potential level of development if offered support. Wells (1995, as cited in Sharpe, 2006, p. 213) identified two types of scaffolding, both of which are evident in the MGT1000 instructional materials and processes: "macro level" and "micro level" scaffolding.

The "macro level" (Wells, 1995, as cited in Sharpe, 2006) or "designed-in" scaffolding (Sharpe, 2001, as cited in Sharpe, 2006) involves "the overall design of the unit of work to achieve specific outcomes including the sequence of tasks within each lesson and types of resources to be utilized" (Sharpe, 2006, p. 213). The course MGT1000 shows evidence of scaffolding in its overall design as 2 of the course's 12 weeks are dedicated to focusing on research and writing as academic skills. In addition, each week self-paced tutorial activities are supplied (online and face-to-face) that orient students to basic academic writing processes. All of these activities focus on the essay that the students must complete as assessment within the course. These activities include provision of: a formula and strategy for linking an element of a case study to a piece of theory and presenting this as a coherent paragraph; a formula and strategy for writing the introduction to an essay; a strategy and formula for writing a five paragraph essay; and a pen and paper tool to assist students to analyse a case study using theory. The last of these is now covered in more detail.

Figure 1provides a simple version of this tool. The grid "enable[s] students to record their thinking while engaging with an actual problem" as occurs within metacognitive cognitive scaffolding (McLoughlin, 2004). The theory that the student will use to analyse the case study is listed in the boxes at the top of the grid along the horizontal axis. Incidents from the case study that the student is required to analyse are listed in a series of boxes down the side of the grid, along the vertical axis. The student then cross references incidents from the case study against elements of theory. Where a link exists, the student records that link in the relevant box. For example, a student could be asked to discern what contribution (if any) that the organisational structure and culture of Abu Ghraid prison made to the much publicised abuse of Abu Ghraid prisoners. Specific elements of culture and structure theory are listed across the horizontal axis of the grid and specific incidents from the case study are listed on the vertical axis. Students then cross reference these to see what (if anything) organisational structure and culture contributed to the scenario.

Figure 1: The case study analysis grid



The grid does a number of things to facilitate higher order thinking in students. It cues students to think in terms of discrete elements of theory and case study and to articulate the links between these. The tool thus assists students to demonstrate "analysis" or the breaking down of a larger entity into its component parts (Bloom, 1956, as cited in Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001). Further, the grid assists students to demonstrate "evaluation" or judgment (Bloom, 1956, as cited in Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001) by providing students with a mechanism for accumulating the evidence that they will need to judge the contribution of organisational culture and structure to the case study.

The micro or "contingent" (Sharpe, 2006, p. 213) forms of scaffolding evident in MGT1000 refer to the dialogue or discourse surrounding any given teaching moment within the course. Dialogue is fundamental to the process of scaffolding (Edwards & Mercer, 1994) and the teaching within MGT1000. Hence, the dialogue surrounding the use of the grid – student-to-teaching staff and student-to-student – incorporated many of the forms of scaffolding identified by Roehler and Cantlon (1996). For example, one of the authors opened the session by "modeling the desired behaviour" (in this case the use of the grid) by "talking out loud" her thinking processes as she used the grid (Roehler & Cantlon, 1996). The next stage in the session involved "inviting student participation" (Roehler & Cantlon, 1996) as students were invited to start to identify other points of cross referencing using their own grids. As students reported their early thoughts on the case study and theory, the lecturer's task was one of "verifying and clarifying student understandings" (Roehler & Cantlon, 1996) – of confirming apt applications and clarifying less compelling applications. It should be noted, however, that for this process of dialogue to be effective a healthy sense of engagement needs to exist among all participants within the classroom. The next section of the paper reports on the creation of the academic as a social presence within study materials as a relationship building mechanism used within the MGT100 course.

Social Presence

Social presence within this discussion is "interpreted as the degree to which a person is perceived as 'real' in mediated communication" (Richardson & Swan, 2003, p. 70). It is related to the notion of "teacher immediacy" – the degree of distance that teachers place between themselves and the students with whom they are communicating (Wiener & Mehrabian, 1968, as cited in Darlaston-Jones, Cohen, Drew, Haunold, Pike & Young, 2001). MGT1000 teaching staff have focused on creating the academic within the course as a real and warm social presence in both online and print-based study materials as a remedy for the "feelings of isolation" (Peel, 2000) and the perception of academics as "uncaring and indifferent" (Tinto, 1993, as cited in Darlaston-Jones, Cowen, Drew, Haunold, Pike & Young, 2001) reported by withdrawing students.

The primary mechanism for creating the academic as a supportive person in MGT1000 learning materials is through the adoption of a particular kind of conversational tone or 'voice' in written communication with students. This voice is constructed as "sociable" rather than "unsociable", "personal" rather than "impersonal", "sensitive" rather than "insensitive" and "warm" rather than "cold", consistent with Short, Williams and Christie's (1976, as cited in Tu & McIsaac, 2002) bipolar scales for the measurement of social presence. This approach to writing is illustrated in the exercise taken from the first module in the study guide, listed below in Figure 2.

Figure 2: Student activity taken from Module One of the MGT1000 study guide

Activity 1 How do you define an organisation?

This is very quick exercise. There is no right or wrong answer to this activity.

1. Note what you see or think of when I say the word organisation. You may wish to write down a few words or draw a quick sketch to capture the first thing that comes to mind.

Activity De-brief

Perhaps the first image that springs to mind for you is the buildings where organisations are usually located. Perhaps a concrete location and material assets like computers or filing cabinets are what an organisation is for you?

For others of you, the first image that springs to mind may be the money, the financial arrangements surrounding the venture. Perhaps capital is the essential feature of an organisation for you?

Perhaps your first image is an office scene from the place where you work, with your boss and the people you supervise. Perhaps this is what an organisation is for you?

For others of you this might seem like a trick question. There are too many possibilities to narrow it down to the single image. The point in this exercise will become clearer as we move through this module.

The instructions demonstrate *sensitivity* and *warmth* by taking some of the unknowns out of the exercise and minimising possible student anxiety about completing one of the first 'tests' of the course. For example, the initial instructions explain that this activity is short and has no right or wrong answers. Further, the voice is active, *personal* and *sociable* as if in conversation with the reader, as exemplified by the instruction, "Note what you see or think of when I say the word organisation". Finally, these four traits – sensitivity, warmth and a capacity to be personal and sociable – are again confirmed in the non-judgmental description of emotional responses that student could have to the activity and in terms of the possible content of student responses to the activity. For example, the debrief lists a number of images of 'the organisation' that students could have had to the activity – with none privileged over the others. Further, understandable student impatience with this kind of activity is also acknowledged and accepted as reasonable.

Conclusion

The MGT100 teaching team initiated the reflective process at the heart of this paper when confronted with the high success rates of low OP students. The team wanted to confirm that positive student grades could be attributed to student performance and good teaching practice rather than a lowering of academic standards. The team then set about the task of speculating about the reasons that they believed that students prospered in this course. The key teaching strategies discussed in this paper included scaffolding and the creation of the academic as a positive social presence within text-based teaching materials. The paper has argued that the use of these strategies may well have contributed to the retention of students, particularly those with low entrance scores, as they actively facilitated student academic and social transition into the university culture. Of course the validity of the teaching team's speculations will be definitely established only when the student voice is incorporated into this discussion, in the second stage of this project. The paper has merit, however, as even without that student voice it documents the academic credentials of these strategies and provides concrete examples of their use in practice.

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